



# 55 years since Nostra Aetate: The future of interreligious dialogue

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October 2020 marks the 55th anniversary of the famous Vatican document known as *Nostra Aetate* (“In our Time”), which was promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in October 1965. Without doubt this document served to radically change the discourse in the field of Jewish-Christian dialogue in particular, and interreligious dialogue in general, in the contemporary period. I discuss this in a film called [I am Joseph Your Brother](#) (produced by the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel in 2001 and available on YouTube), which was prepared following the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel in March 2000.

In this film, I said emphatically: “We have moved from persecution to partnership, from confrontation to cooperation, from diatribe to dialogue.”

Not only did this foundational document open up a new dialogue between the Catholic Church – and other Christian denominations – and the Jewish people, but it initiated a dialogue between the Catholic Church and other religions, including and especially Islam.

It is now accepted practice for leaders of religious communities at all levels to be in dialogue with each other in many places in the world, and to work together in common cause wherever possible to heal the world. This is also the case in Israel, where I have lived and worked for the past 41 years. Interreligious dialogue is part of the landscape here, an essential part of our common life, although it has not yet reached the masses here (or in other places).

In this reflection, I have decided to focus on the future, rather than the past. Much has been written about the many new positive developments in Jewish-Christian relations over the past 55 years. A great deal of progress has been made! It is time now to look towards the future and think about the challenges that we need to confront. I want to focus on three major issues connected to the future:

- What are the main issues facing Jews and Christians in the years and decades ahead in Israel?
- Why is the dialogue with Islam so important and yet so neglected, and what needs to be done?
- How can we connect the dialogue to reality, especially to the issues of peace and justice in Israel and in other parts of the world?

The number one problem that we face in Israel – and around the world – is still ignorance. After all these years, we still don’t know very much about each other’s religion. Accordingly, we still need multi-faceted, sustained and systematic educational programs in many and diverse settings: schools, seminaries, teacher-training colleges and universities, and in the curricula of Jewish, Christian and Muslim schools, all over the world, and in Israel.

During the past 55 years, Christians have done much more to educate their people about Jews

and Judaism than we Jews have done to educate our people about Christians and Christianity. This is undoubtedly due to the asymmetrical nature of Jewish-Christian history, and the fact that Judaism is more integral to Christianity than the reverse.

In the era in which we now live, it ought to be impossible for Jews to continue to teach about Catholics – or Christians in general – as if Nostra Aetate and Vatican II never took place, just as it would be inconceivable for Catholics and other Christians to teach about Jews as if the state of Israel had not been established in 1948. We Jews will have to do much more in the future to educate our communities about the revolutionary changes in Christian thinking concerning Jews and Judaism in recent decades. This is true wherever Jews live, including within Israeli society where a great deal of historical anti-Christian sentiment still prevails.

In addition, for too long the Jewish-Christian dialogue has been mostly about community relations, and it is not surprising therefore that it is sometimes referred to as “intergroup relations.” This has to change. We need to learn from each other and to develop a genuine interreligious dialogue – a dialogue based on mutuality and reciprocity. More and more academic settings are the places where this is taking place. Many colleges, universities and seminaries around the world now have special institutes devoted to this.

Why is the dialogue with Islam so important and yet so neglected, and what needs to be done?

In Israel we live as a Jewish majority, with a strong Arab minority of 21% of the citizens, most of whom are Muslim, but our dialogue has not engaged Muslims enough. Why not?

- Because we are all afraid. Some of our fear is rational. Yet, much of it is based on phobia, an irrational fear, fed by rumors and stereotyping of a whole community and a whole religion and all of its followers.
- Because we have largely been influenced by the media – who only portray the work of fundamentalist extremist radical cut-throat Muslims – ISIS, al-Qaeda, and all the rest.
- Because we don't really make the effort to come to know Islam. We don't study the sacred texts of Muslims and their holy teachings. Rather, we rely on the Internet and the tabloids to “teach” us what Islam really is.

Fostering hatred of another's religion – due to the fanatical acts of certain extremist groups who claim to be inspired by this religion but actually distort it to be unrecognizable – is not a good prescription for building a society of peaceful coexistence.

Accordingly, I would argue that developing a genuine dialogue with Muslims in Israel – and around the world – beginning in our own local communities – is one of the highest religious and ethical imperatives for Jews and Christians now and for the future. We cannot continue to bury our heads in the sand and ignore this topic. It is vital for our common future.

I have been engaged in this for much of the past 30 years, and in so doing, I have come to know another kind of Islam, not the one in the news every day and not the one on the Internet every minute. I have encountered many kadis, imams, sheikhs and ordinary Muslims – both in Israel and internationally – who preach and teach a moderate brand of Islam, that is not reported in the media, one that espouses ethical and righteous ideals, which are very similar to the basic humanistic values that are shared by mainstream Judaism and Christianity.

Finally, how can we connect our dialogue to reality, especially to the critical issues of peace-building among Israel and the Palestinian people?

What will be needed is what I like to call “the other peace process” – the educational, religious, and spiritual one, to supplement the political one.

Interreligious dialogue will remain irrelevant and out of date if we do not address ourselves to the critical issues of peace and justice in the world. Just as it should no longer be merely among Christians and Jews, it should no longer be ephemeral and abstract, focusing on the past, rather than the future. It must be related to peace-building efforts – and efforts to ensure social justice –all over the world, including in Israel, now and in the years ahead.

In the future, interreligious dialogue will be needed more than ever before. There will be an existential need for a massive religious, spiritual, educational, and psychological campaign to change the hearts and minds of the people on both sides of many conflicts – including and especially the Israeli-Palestinian one. We will have no choice but to bring people together in large numbers to engage in dialogue, education, and action in order to learn to live in peace. This should include rabbis, imams, priests and ministers as the grassroots community leaders; teachers; educators; headmasters; assistant principals; curriculum writers; youth movement leaders and informal educators in a wide variety of settings, such as community centers, camps and seminar centers. Men and women from all parts of the Palestinian and Jewish societies – professionals as well as laypersons, educators and activists, community leaders and laypersons.

In my part of the world, there is much despair. Many people on both sides of many conflicts have given up completely. They feel that peace will never come, that it is an illusion, that it is not within our reach.

Yet, there are still people – Jews, Muslims and Christians – currently engaged in interreligious dialogue, education and action in the Middle East– and in other parts of the world – who are continuing to play their part in helping to make miracles happen! They will have a major role to play in this people-to-people peace process for a long time to come. In the long run, interreligious dialogue will become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem, as together people from different religious and cultural backgrounds confront the challenges and crises of the present and the future.

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